

Mayor Ballard steps up push for water, sewer transfer

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Indianapolis -- Mayor Greg Ballard made a high-pressure sales pitch Tuesday morning. The mayor is pushing for the sale of the city's sewer and water utilities to Citizens Energy.

Noting the city's crumbling infrastructure, including abandoned homes and decaying roads and bridges, the mayor said those problems can't be fixed unless the City-County Council approves the transfer of the city's wastewater treatment and water company to Citizens Energy.

"That's exactly what I am telling you. If you want these houses taken care of, this must go through," the mayor said. He added that there is no other way to pay for those fixes. "I am not going to raise taxes."

Ballard made the sales pitch in front of two abandoned homes on the city's northwest side.

The transfer is expected to net the city about \$425 million in cash, savings and borrowing power. Without that money, Ballard insists the city doesn't have the resources to fix problems eating away at city neighborhoods.

"If we do not act now and the council does not support this opportunity, two things are going to be certain. You will pay more than you should for your water and your waste water and homes like this will continue to deteriorate and roads and sidewalks will continue to crumble," said Ballard, indicating the abandoned home behind him. "We must act now. This is the opportunity."

He called the deal a "once in a generation opportunity to fix decades-old problems."

The opportunity won't last forever. The mayor says because federal stimulus dollars are involved, the deal has to be signed, sealed, delivered and done by the end of 2010.

The sale would put city water and sewers under the control of Citizens Energy, which also runs Citizens Gas. The mayor is facing plenty of opposition on the transfer.

"I disagree, needless to say," said Councilwoman Joanne Sanders, a Democrat.

Sanders and other opponents want more details and object to turning over a public asset to private control.

"Everyone needs water to live and we will turn over authority in making public policy on a natural resource. That disturbs me," Sanders said.

The controversial transfer faces an important vote Tuesday evening in the rules committee of the City-County Council, which will decide whether to pass the proposal on for a full council vote.

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